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ABSTRACT

Communication between individuals from different cultures can fail simply because of the culturally-oriented assumptions that speakers make about one another's responses. The higher rate of discipline referrals among African-American males involves behavior that is related to cultural and communicative issues. In an effort to build their communicative competence, these adolescents adopt a highly stylized use of words and gestures, many of which can be misinterpreted by those who are unfamiliar with their culture. Current demographics indicate that only 1 out of 10 teachers will be African-American; the other 9 will be Caucasian, probably females whose undergraduate education has presented them with little or no knowledge of the cultural orientation of African-American males. This essay tries to sensitize teachers to three commonly used verbal strategies, namely, rappin', woofin', and playing the dozens--their origin, purpose, and use in the classroom--and provides alternatives for teachers so that they can maximize the communicative competence of those African-American males who use these strategies. A list of 45 references is included. (TE)

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SENSITIZING TEACHERS TO CULTURAL DIFFERENCES: AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

The United States is a multicultural society, consisting of one shared core culture, the macroculture, composed of smaller microcultures - all of which are a part of the core culture. Culture is defined as the values, symbols, interpretations and perspectives that distinguish one group of people from another (Banks, 1989). People who are a part of the same culture usually interpret the meanings of symbols, artifacts and behaviors the same or at least in similar ways. Some individuals belong to more than one culture. Cultural patterns influence the way information is communicated, learned, organized and used.

Teachers teach from their own cultural perspectives (Nichols, this volume). Although they recognize the multiplicity of cultures, teachers know very little about cultures other than their own. In 1989, 92 percent of teacher education students were White, while only 4.7 percent were African-American (p. A13). Yet, by the end of this decade, at least 33 percent of the students will be minorities. Those who will teach the growing number of minority students will come from the macroculture. The majority of teachers for the mushrooming minority population will be white females (Chira, 1990). For many teachers, both present and future, the first contact they have with Black adolescent males occurs in the classroom. This contact is usually negative because while African-Americans currently constitute only 25 percent of all students, they comprise 41 percent of all special education placements (Kunjufu, 1987,

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p.11). And, African-American males lead the nation in students suspended and expelled.

Taylor (1987) reports that the higher rate of discipline problems for minority students involves behaviors related to cultural and communication issues. Of the behaviors punished, more than half are related to those issues, including challenging the teacher's authority, not listening quietly when the teacher is presenting a lesson, interrupting another student, responding in a loud voice, socializing in class, and using physical means to settle a conflict (p.31). Such punishments are not surprising because educational institutions do little to prepare teachers for the differences between their cultures and those of the students they will be teaching (Pine and Hilliard, 1990).

The majority of the problems occur with adolescent males. All adolescents search for self-identity, to clarify who they are and what their role in society will be. In the African-American culture between the ages of eight and thirteen, the adolescent male is developing his self-confidence and asserting his masculinity. Even though at this age he is leaving the world of childhood, he has not been accepted into adulthood. In school he is making a transition from the primary grades to the intermediate grades. During this transition period the peer group exerts significant influence on how he talks, how he dresses and how he interacts with others (Mussen, et al., 1955).

Recent studies by Foster (1986), Hale-Benson (1986), Kunjufu (1986), Taylor (1987), and Nelson-Barber and Meier (1990) suggest that teachers need to consider the cultural traditions associated with the language used by African-American males during the pre-adolescent and adolescent period.

Communication between two individuals from different cultures can fail simply because of the culturally-oriented assumptions the speakers make about one another's responses. Curriculum makers must seek to understand culturally determined preferences for thinking and acting (Heath, 1983). Misinterpretations of student behaviors and motives can cause misunderstandings between teachers and students and lead to poor communication between them. It is virtually impossible to teach someone you cannot communicate with.

Taylor (1987) and Hill (1989) suggest that we need to have first-hand experiences in order to be sensitized to the many subtleties of any culture. Differences between cultures are often considered threatening. For example, wearing a hat indoors is considered impolite in some cultures. Other cultures consider it a part of an outfit, and requests to remove the hat might be regarded as offensive. Students who take offense at such a request could be interpreted as challenging the teacher's

authority. The first step in developing sensitivity to other cultures is awareness.[1]

Black Communications

Many urban working class African-American males have a distinct communication style, one that differs significantly from that of the school. The style is a part of their dialect, as is the development of communicative competence. The development of communicative competence is an essential ingredient in the socialization process for males as they pass from boyhood to manhood. Many names for the dialect exist: Black English, Vernacular Black English, Nonstandard English, Black Dialect, Ebonics, Negro Nonstandard English, Black Language and Dialect. Hoover (1985) contends that most terms used to describe the dialect are pejorative and suggests the term "Black Communications," which also predicates that this communication system is more than just speech. Black Communications includes:

1. Speech code--with grammar, phonology, lexicon, intonation and semantics;

2. Speech acts or verbal strategies such as testifying, sounding, woofing, signifying, rapping, and playing the dozens;

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[1] For a thorough coverage of African-American culture and contributions as well as detailed lesson plans for all grade levels, see African-American Baseline Essays (1990), Portland Public Schools, District #1, Multnomah County, Portland, Oregon 97227.

3. Style, which includes call-response, dramatic repetition and improvisation;

4. Nonverbal behavior such as silence in response to a ridiculous question, kinesics or side by side stance in conversation and oculesics or eye rolling;

5. Sociolinguistic rules for speaking such as avoidance of the use of "boy" for man and "girl" for woman or "you people" for Black Americans (Hoover, 1985, pp. 9-23); and

6. Personal talk that involves special speaking behaviors used by those who are familiar and trust one another (Abrahams, 1972).

This chapter will examine one broad feature of Black Communications: verbal strategies as they are used by African-American males during the ages of eight through fourteen. I have chosen to focus on males for several reasons:

1. Historically, Black males have been noted for talking a particular kind of stylized talk,

2. Learning how to use this talk is an essential part of passage from boyhood to manhood,

3. Those who are successful at using this talk are often punished by schools, and

4. Teachers generally are unfamiliar with the rules, purpose and intent of this stylized talk.

Johnson (1990) has described African-American males as an endangered species! Well-documented and publicized statistics have placed them at the bottom of the social totem pole - below Black females, White females and White males - on every scale imaginable (test achievement, school behavior, remedial classes, dropouts, employment, crime, imprisonment, and death by natural causes). There are more African American males in prison than there are enrolled in college!

My intent is to sensitize teachers to the ways many African American males use words. It is my hope that teachers will listen more intently to these young men and search for ways they can capitalize on their students' communicative competence to improve communication between them and their students. What are essentially cultural strengths can be converted into positive teaching and learning experiences as teachers devise creative and constructive ways of integrating orality and literacy.

The Oral Tradition

The Black communication system had its roots in the indigenous languages of West Africa. It was carried here in the hearts and minds of slaves who were brought by force to a hostile land. Only the strongest and most determined survived the passage. They brought no mementos, no luggage, only the clothes

on their back. In this new land members of the same tribe were forbidden to talk with one another under fear of death. So, they devised covert ways of communicating and disguised them in their talk, their music and their actions. Although they were forced to learn new words to respond to their captors, they retained the basic grammar and idiom of their native language. They also maintained their basic view of the world.

The African World View

Essential to their world view was the belief in God as the creator and sustainer of all things. God officiated over the spiritual world and the material world. The African world view maintained a fundamental unity between the spiritual and the material. Religion and nature were one. Africans always sought a balance and rhythm in this unity (Nobles, 1980). Thompson (1983) found evidence of this overriding theme in his investigation of the art of numerous African tribes. Herskovits (1941) confirmed this unity in his descriptions of the integration of song and dance in the Dahomean, Gold Coast choruses, the Shango cult songs of Trinidad and the Brazilian Negro melodies. Across the diaspora, wherever large groups of Africans reside, there is evidence of the theme of unity, balance and rhythm.

In the African kinship system, the tribe gave identity to the individual. The individual was part of the collective unity, a participant in collective responsibility. Whatever happened to the individual happened to the tribe. Solidarity and community life were esteemed. African self-concept derived from the belief that "... I am because we are and because we are, therefore I am" (Nobles, p. 29). The African world view emphasized survival of the tribe, oneness with nature, cooperation, commonality, groupness and interdependence. In sharp contrast, the European world view emphasized survival of the fittest, control over nature, competition, differences, individuality and independence (pp. 102, 103).

In the Unites States the nature of social relationships isolated New World Africans from the rest of society. This isolation enabled Africans to maintain their culture in spite of the separation from their homeland. Because Africans were forbidden by law to read and write, orality or word of mouth became the primary mode of maintaining the culture. This reliance on the spoken word came directly from the African tradition.

The Spoken Word

The spoken word was called nommo by the Africans. The word itself held magic power. Sy (1989) calls it the primordial Verb.

Smitherman (1977) quotes Jahn, who studied African orality:

> "All activities of men, and all the movements in nature, rest on the word, on the productive power of the word, which is water and heat and seed and Nommo, that is, life force itself... The force, responsibility, and commitment of the word, and the awareness the word alone alters the world..." (p.78)

Newborn children took on meaning when their father whispered their new name in his ear. In African oral tradition words accompanied medicine, death rites and work. Words even preceded and sometimes accompanied battle. The songs, histories, and traditions were the very soul of the tribe and were enshrined in the vernacular (Tarynor, 1976, p. 107).

Alex Haley in his epic Roots described the griots, men who could recite generations and generations of history in an effort to keep alive great deeds of ancient kings. Urban and rural "streetwise" men from Bermuda and the Caribbean could relate family stories for hours on end - all as a means of maintaining their reputation as verbal performers (Abrahams, 1976). African languages and cultural forms were carried on intact in Brazil and the Caribbean with later generations reciting church rituals in secret languages (Alleyne, 1980, p. 17).[3]

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[3] For a demonstration of the similarities across the diaspora see Story of English Series: Next year's words; a look into the future. Films Incorporated, 5547 N. Ravenswood, Chicago, IL 60640-1199.

Today in the African-American community high value is placed upon the ability to verbalize. This value is especially significant among African-American adolescent males. Every time a speaker opens his mouth, he is further establishing his rep or reputation. Language is a means of survival, helping the user acquire status, leadership and success. It symbolizes toughness, bravery and masculinity. Orality can make the difference between

> ... having or not having food to eat, a place to live, clothes to wear, being accepted or rejected by one's peers, and being personally and emotionally secure or risking a complete loss of ego. Therefore, for a member of street culture, language is not only a communicative device but also a mechanism of control and power. (Abrahams and Gay, 1975, p. 159)

Abrahams and Gay's description reflects the magic power of the word - nommo. Verbal strategies are part of the skills African-American males must learn in order to pass from boyhood to manhood. They are an integral part of the culture shared by males within the Black community (Kunjufu, 1986).

Verbal Strategies

The Black male's survival in the peer group is dependent upon his adeptness at using a variety of verbal strategies. Verbal strategies are defined as the highly stylized use of words

and gestures to impress, persuade or control the audience. Names for the strategies vary according to the location and the period in time. For instance, informants who live in San Diego, report that basin' is the same as playing the Dozens; in Savannah, it is called checkin', in Washington, D.C., jonin'. See the list below for names that describe various strategies.

Names for Verbal Strategies

harpin'	crackin'	buggin'
rappin'	checkin'	luggin'
shuckin'& jivin'	soundin'	cappin'
signifyin'	markin'	basin'
testifyin'	loud mouthin'	droppin' lugs
woofin'	jonin'	playin' the dozens
dissin'	bulldozin'	gum beatin'
		humbuggin'

These words are in a constant state of flux. New words are always being developed in an effort to maintain a secret code that only the African-American community peer group understands (Abrahams and Gay). Although the names for the verbal strategies vary, the functions remain the same. The plethora of names attests to the position of importance these strategies occupy in the Black community. The appropriate use of verbal strategies is an integral part of the communicative competence of African-

American males. This competence involves gaining the skills that will prepare them for manhood: purpose, control, self-discipline and independence.

Verbal strategies involve the words as well as how the voice and body are used in saying the words, how the utterances are used in social settings and how others interpret their use. This discussion will cover only three verbal strategies: rapping, woofing and playing a game called the Dozens. In order for communication to be effective in the African-American community, interaction is obligatory. This verbal interaction is entitled call-response.

Call-Response

Call-response reflects the African world view of unity and interdependence. Call-response seeks to bring together the speaker and the listener in a unified movement. It is a "... spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all the speaker's statements (calls) are punctuated by expressions (responses) from the listener" (Smitherman, 1977, p. 104).[3]

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[3] As you silently read each entire line of the following quotation, repeat each underlined word aloud. In the silent reading you are taking the part of the speaker issuing the call. In the oral reading you are the listener, giving the response.

In the beginning was the Word
And the word was with God
And the word was God. (John 1:1)

In call-response both parties talk and both parties listen. There is an emotional synergism. Speakers give one another constant feedback so they both can assess the effectiveness of their performance. The speaker has the responsibility of issuing the call, and the listener has the obligation to respond in some overt way by smiling, laughing, nodding, rocking side by side, hitting the desk or saying something like "Amen" or "uh-huh" to confirm agreement or disagreement.

The European world view is in a sharp contrast: one who "listens" to a speaker does so by sitting quietly, looking at the speaker and rarely displaying an outward sign or response. It is impolite to talk when someone else is talking. According to Kochman (1981), Whites consider continuous feedback in conversation as a constant source of interruption.

Contemporary jazz, popular music, rock and rap all have numerous instances of call-response. Call-response was common in the slaves' songs. In the traditional Black church the reputation of the minister is determined by how adept he is at issuing the call and receiving responses. The same holds true for African-American males in terms of their peer group. Group status is based upon the youth's adeptness at soliciting responses from the audience.

Cross cultural miscommunication can occur when people of different cultures interact without knowing the obligations of the speaker and the listener. The African- American perspective unconsciously assumes that the listener must react in some overt way. When this does not happen, the speaker may assume the listener is uninterested or just does not care (Smitherman, 1977, p. 118). Students may mistrust a teacher who has that seemingly uncaring attitude.

Rappin'

Although it is enjoying a popular resurgence, rapping as a verbal strategy is an old tradition. Originally, rappin' was employed in male-female relationships as an introductory device. A male who was interested in pursuing a relationship with a female would "rap to" her to test her receptiveness (Abrahams and Gay, 1975, p. 160). Rappin' is "...a colorful or distinctive style of talking into which the speaker injects his personality so as to make a favorable impression" (Burling, 1973, p. 84). Its most recent uses seem to be a blend of the traditional with the new. Today, African-American males rap to exercise their verbal ability and sharpen their wit.

Kochman (1981) lists three common uses of rap:

1. To provide information to someone (runnin' somethin' down);
2. To convince or persuade someone to do something (whuppin' the game);
3. To introduce oneself (rappin to a woman to win her affections);

Today, we must add a fourth:

4. To entertain through music and bring a message that is played to a definite beat with the lyrics chanted rather than sung.

Any rap is highly stylized, exaggerated and flamboyant (Smitherman, 1977). Rap is accompanied by a performance - the use of gestures, movement of the head from side to side, or leaning one way or another. The performance/rap is good if it brings a response: a smile, a handshake (giving skin), applause, consent, wild laughter or some other overt reaction. (This strategy assumes call-response.) The intent of the rap is to put the speaker in the position of control and to impress the listener. Kochman (1981) explains that efforts to control on the part of Black students are generally viewed as negative by the White culture. Bragging and boasting label an individual as a show-off. Muhammed Ali endured a negative image in his efforts to prove that he was "The Greatest", and the media down-plays athletes because they are "cocky".

The rapper is successful if he can absorb the audience in his conversation. As the person performs his rap, he may change the pitch and/or volume and/or rhythm of his voice, place stress on an unusual syllable, or use a range of vocal effects, such as rasp, growl, falsetto and whine. The rapper uses active verb forms in his efforts to "throw a rap" or "run it down". His rap

is filled with slang, colorful exaggerations and unbelievable comparisons. This description given by Abrahams in 1972 still holds true for today's contemporary "rap" as well as for rap music.

Some middle-class Blacks and Whites are very fearful of rappers, especially if they are unfamiliar with the strategy. When some teachers see groups of loud-talking, boisterous, gesturing and shoving adolescents walking down the hall, they could become quite fearful. This fear leads to negative reactions from teachers such as confronting them and reporting them to the office for possible suspension (Foster, 1986, pp. 211 -212). Teachers can usually get the rappers to settle down with an appropriate professional request as in the following:

> One morning I was working in my office, and one of our students came in and started moving up and down and said he had to go to the lavatory. I listened, kept working, sort of ignored him, but watched him out of the corner of one eye.
>
> Finally, after a few minutes, I turned to him and said, "No, you can't go. Your rap is weak."
>
> He laughed and said, "Ok, see you later." And he tipped on back to class (Foster, p. 240).

The teacher's reaction was appropriate for that individual. He basically communicated with the student without embarrassing him. Blowing up the issue by openly chastising the student unnecessarily detracts from instructional time and embarrasses the rapper. It serves to alienate the rapper, causing subsequent retaliation and no-win situations. Peer groups are very important in the evaluation of the rap, for they are the rapper's audience; they must assess his performance.

The love rap allows an African-American male to approach a female he does not know. It is a means of introducing himself, and winning the heart, affections and mind of the female. (Issac Hayes and Barry White use this kind of rap in their vocal music.) Smitherman has used an example written nearly 100 years ago to illustrate the love rap. Even today it has only to be uttered aloud by a convincing African-American male to bring a reaction from a female, who smiles to indicate that she is interested or frowns and turns her head in the opposite direction to show that she does not care to talk to the suitor. "My dear kin' miss, has you any objections to me draving my cher to yer side and revolvin' de wheel of my conversation around de axle of your understandin'?" (Southern Workman Hampton Institute Folklore Collection, 1895, p. 83)

I am totally awed at the rap music, a kind of folk music, prevalent on radio, television and in some school hallways and school yards today. Young people can recite detailed rhymes that

carry a message with no apparent preparation and deliver them at speeds up to 200 to 250 words per minute, not missing a beat. This verbal strategy has been assimilated into the advertising and entertainment industry so that even the Pillsbury Doughboy has a rap - along with Bob Hope and McDonalds. An organization entitled Stop the Violence (1989) has succeeded in combating the negative influence of some rap groups. They have dedicated their profits to using rap in positive ways to inspire young people.[4]

Pat Pike has also used this cultural strength to create a supplemental reading program designed to help students who have severe problems with decoding skills. Wordbuster Reading Rap (1987) covers long and short vowels, the consonants c and g, syllables, vowels digraphs and silent e through a catchy rap and accompanying written and motivational activities. Pike provides step by step directions and music for creating additional raps and coordinating poetry writing and articulation drills through cooperative learning. She has capitalized on a strength of many students who are not succeeding in school. Used in this very positive way, rap coordinates a holistic view of language that is thought about, spoken, written and read. By capitalizing on this cultural difference, the teacher can use the strengths of

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[4] The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) has recently aired a new television situation comedy that has a fun-loving, but innocent rapper as the star. The show is "Fresh Prince of Bel Air". It will be interesting to follow the progress of a show that portrays obvious cultural differences within the African-American community.

students who can compose rhyme, write it down, memorize it and perform it for an audience. For some students a very natural process, rapping, can be converted into what Heath (1986, p. 386) calls a literacy event: a piece of writing revolves around talk.

Woofin'

Selling woof (wolf) tickets refers to any kind of strong language which is purely idle boasting, a form of bragging that is nearly always taken for the real thing by an outsider from another culture. Woofin' can be a kind of rap. It is"... a ritual wherein anger and hostility can be sustained at the verbal level without violence. Through woofin', a player can maintain an image of being fearless and tough with the hope that once that image is achieved, he won't have to prove it" (Hale-Benson, 1982, p. 171). Woofin' is also called "dogin'", "bogardin'", "loud mouthin'", "loud talkin'", "soundin'" or "runnin' a strong rap".

There are usually two people involved in woofin', although there can also be an audience. To accept a challenge to fight is to accept a "woof ticket". The intent of woofin' is intimidation. In the school setting, woofin' can take these forms:

1. Standing in the hall and blocking the teacher;
2. Standing in front of a teacher or walking down the hall with a belt opened;
3. Yelling and moving one's body in a menacing way while arguing about a grade;

4. Just standing and staring at the teacher (Kunjufu, 1986, calls this the Showdown; Cooke, 1980, labels it the "silent rap");
5. Almost any nonverbal, verbal or physical form of intimidation (Foster, 1986, p. 192).

Whether students woof at one another or at the teacher, they have to be on the offensive to woof. The general rule for woofin' is that you do not woof on someone you cannot beat/frighten/intimidate. For woofin' to work, the person who is "woofed on" must be on the defensive and the one "selling woof tickets" must be on the offensive. The woofer has the attitude "I'm bad, and I know I'm bad," where "bad" means excellent. Students generally agree about which teachers they can "get over on" by woofin' them. They consider teachers' lack of understanding of this verbal strategy as a weakness.

> Students themselves testify to the effectiveness of their use of language as a means of exerting power and control over the teacher and the classroom situation. Black kids claim that the middle-class teacher is "stupid", "lacks common sense", "dumb", "naive", and that she will "believe anything". Her vulnerability and ignorance about black life and how black students function makes her an easy prey for students. They are so easy to "run a game on" that the exercise is hardly worth the effort. (Abrahams and Gay, pg. 164)

For the middle class female teacher who is probably having her first direct contact with African-American males, woofin' can be terrifying. Society has painted a deviant picture of

Black males through its television and newspaper portrayal of Blacks selling drugs, committing Black on Black crime, getting arrested and filling prison cells. George Bush's 1989 presidential campaign legitimatized the media's negative emphasis by showing pictures of Willie Horton, the Black criminal Michael Dukakis was supposed to have released from jail. A vote for Dukakis was perceived as a vote for Willie Horton. Those who voted for Bush were expected to infer that Michael Dukakis would allow such criminals to freely walk the streets.

The inexperienced teacher is also at a disadvantage because the student is an expert at woofin'. In the Showdown during which the student just stands with his arms folded and stares at the teacher, the student has the advantage. "First, he chooses the battlefield, the strategy, and the weapons, all of which involve the use of words. Second, his skill and adeptness at 'keeping cool' are so well developed that they are hard to shake or to surpass" (Abrahams and Gay, 19863, p. 164). The teacher tells him to do something and he does it, but in a way that unnerves the teacher so that he gets his way throughout the situation, as in the following example. To illustrate my point about female teachers, I have replaced "brother" in "Right on, brother" with "teacher" in the student's dialogue.

> On this particular day the students have decided not to do anything in class. The teacher enters and instructs the students to begin work. No one says or does

> anything. Then one student begins to sing softly to himself. The teacher asks the singer to be quiet and return to his regularly assigned seat. The student responds with "Right on, [teacher], I'm gonna move," and he does. The teacher says something else and the student answers, "Right on, [teacher]". The teacher, very much irritated says "Shut up". The student answers very softly."Right on, [teacher]". The teacher says, "I don't like your attitude today and if you don't be quiet I'm gonna put you out." The student, more forceful this time says, "Right on, [teacher]". The teacher answers with "get out," and the student responds, "Right on [teacher]", as he slowly walks out of the door. (Abrahams and Gay, 1975, p. 165).

The teacher was perceived as incompetent; so the student won that game. The students in that class lost respect for the teacher, confirming their supposition that she was a pushover. Now, they could run that same game on her again whenever they decided to do so.

Here is another woofin' scenario that Foster (1986) describes as Reality 58, which could also be called a Showdown. "A new teacher was walking in the hall when a few boys approached him from the opposite direction. One of the boys peeled off from the group, and as he and the teacher came face to face, he moved his hand out in front of the teacher, placed his palm against the wall, and looked at the teacher" (pg. 194).

What would you do if a student uses woofin' on you? What are the options?

1. You could stop, turn the other way and run. If you flee, the student has won. He loses respect for you and will not listen to another thing you say. He sold the woof ticket and you bought it.

2. You could become visibly upset and preach to the student about the value of respect, telling him you will report him to the office if he doesn't move. The student as in the previous scenario would probably show no visible sign, ignore you and/or aggravate you even more. He might even push you into hitting him by simply out staring you or laughing or sneering in your face. If you hit him, you have lost again. He'll probably hit you back. Remember, he's selling tickets in front of an audience and they will encourage him. No one wants to lose face.

3. You could sell some woof tickets of your own. You could out stare him with a look that is "badder" than his and say emphatically "Move!" Or, you could quickly snap his arm at the pressure point, and move him out of the way. You win his respect by not yielding to his efforts to frighten you. A word of caution: Any time you touch a student, you take a chance, though, so weigh this decision.

4. You could reproduce a supply of "woof tickets" and hand one out to the student who runs the game on you. This tactic would acknowledge the student's adeptness and confirm the teacher's understanding and appreciation of his attempt to run a game on her. This might disarm the student because the objective of woofin' is to avoid physical confrontation through effective intimidation. You could hand out the ticket, quickly and move on to your destination and still maintain control over the situation without antagonizing the student (Foster, 1986).

5. Or, you could observe what an African-American teacher who understands the verbal strategies does in his/her class.

Kochman (1981) found that verbally aggressive behavior is regarded very differently in Black and White communities. As with woofin', African Americans hold that angry verbal disputes do not have to escalate to actual physical fighting. "... (I)nsults and threats can be maintained by blacks at the verbal level without violence necessarily resulting." Whereas, "... whites tend to see the public expression of hostility... "as a

clear warning of intent to act upon that threat" (pp. 48-49). So, from a White cultural perspective, woofin' is regarded as a prelude to a fight, not an attempt to avoid a fight, which is the actual intent of this verbal strategy.

It is quite possible, then, for White and/or insensitive teachers to report woofin' to the office, and label frequent "woofers" as "overly aggressive" and "a discipline problem". African-American males who continually exercises their adeptness at woofin' are often placed in in-house suspension or in programs for the "behaviorally disordered", responses that are inappropriate to this verbal strategy.

Playin' the Dozens

Playing the dozens, which may begin as early as age eight, is considered a manhood rite (Abrahams, 1963; Schulz, 1977; Hannerz, 1977; Nobles, 1980; Cooke, 1980 and Kunjufu, 1988). This is a game in which two opponents dual verbally, making derogatory remarks about each others' family members, usually the mother or other females in the family. The basis for this game is call-response. Each player is appreciated and judged by the group, whose responsibility it is to urge the players on. The rules include avoidance of talk about deceased family members, never playing the game with a stranger, and using inaccurate statements of reality to defame one another's mother for fear that a fight might ensue, which sometimes happens (Kunjufu, 1986, pp. 16-17).

The winner of the game is determined by the audience, who judges both players' reactions to one another's comments. The cultural hero is the player who hurls the most linguistically derogatory comments and still maintains his composure. The slurs can be in the form of a rhyme: "I saw yo momma on the railroad track, looked at her and said 'Oooh, git back' (Kunjufu, 1986, p. 16). Or, the slur can just be the words "yo momma". When I was in school, we just cleared our throats and that had the same meaning. For an indepth discussion see Labov (1972) who has categorized examples of rhymes into categories of complex syntactic structures which have strict discourse rules.

Smitherman (1977) reports that the original verses of the dozens included twelve sex acts, each one given in words that rhymed with the numbers from 1 to 12. She describes the game as "... a competitive oral test of linguistic ingenuity and verbal fluency." Abrahams (1963) says that references to sex acts are what distinguish the Dirty Dozens from the Dozens.

There is ample evidence that the origins of this game are in Africa. Hare and Hare (1985) report that playing the dozens might be a re-creation of a Nigerian ritual function called <u>trickstering</u> during which the boy verbally puts down his father. Nobles (1980), in his treatise on African philosophy, reveals that traditions were handed down from father to son. He

describes ritualized orations and dance ceremonies that were used to release suppressed emotions.

> ... slavery unknowingly permitted the cultural transmission of the African traditional emphasis of oration and its consequent effects on the mind or memory to remain pretty much in tact. White... suggests that playing the 'dozens' as part of the oral tradition is a game used by black youngsters to teach themselves to keep cool, think fast under pressure, and not say what is really on their minds. Things like rapping and the dozens could also be vieved as initiation rites or possibly instances where the 'power' of the word is used to make the 'individual' psychologically feel better. (p. 34)

Foster (1986) also reports on African origins. Several are among the Ashanti, who sang opo verses and were known for verbal and nonverbal insults about ancestors. There are also references to the Trinidadian game mamaguy, the African Giguku's taboo that infuriates a man to mention his mother's name in an indecent way, the Dahomean joking relationship and African songs of recrimination. There are examples of how this game was used during slavery times as in this excerpt from OSSIE: The Autobiography of a Black Woman:

> ...they (slaves) wasn't just playing for fun. They was playing to teach themselves and their sons how to stay alive. The whole idea was to learn to take whatever the master said to you without answering back or hitting him, 'cause that was the way a slave had to be, so's he could go on living. (Foster, 1988, pp. 228-229)

Other names for the dozens include checkin', crackin', getting down on the crib, getting on the kitchen folks, getting on moms, going to the kitchen, giving a man the spoke, joaning

(jonin), playing, putting a man on the wheel, signifying (siggin'), and sounding. Although names vary from city to city and region to region, every male I have interviewed from school superintendents and college presidents to cab drivers and school students - all know about the dozens and admit they have played the game themselves or have heard it played. Most have related a specific humorous incident that stood out in their minds. Some have stated outright "I don't play that" or "that's a dangerous game."

The competencies of a good dozens player are:

1. He must control his emotions. Here in the presence of friends, terribly derogatory statements are made about his mother, who is dear to him.
2. He must begin to search for his masculine identity as he pulls away from the strong influence of his mother by withstanding derogatory comments.
3. He must develop the ability to make words rhyme and utter them spontaneously.
4. He must be able to improvise - think on his feet and counter with an even more clever slur upon his opponent's female relative.
5. He must be brave enough to take the risk of being bested in front of his peers. Losing means disapproval, being proved ineffective at words, and that is connected to being effeminate in the eyes of peers (Abrahams, 1963, p. 55; Kunjufu, 1986, p. 17).

In the classroom peers playing the dozens can present a serious problem for the teacher. Especially if he or she is unaware of the game and its significance. (See Nelson-Barber and Meier, 1990.) Here is a typical example of how playing the dozens disrupts the classroom.

> The students in your science class are about to do an experiment. All materials have been distributed. You have explained the details for each group. One student loudly accuses the other in his group of talking about his momma. The students face each other as if they <u>might</u> begin to fight.

How should you respond to this situation? Here are some options:

1. Direct the other groups to begin their work. Go to the two players and state clearly that you do not allow the game of the dozens (use the appropriate name for your locale) in your room. This tells the students that you are aware of the game and that you understand what they are doing, but that will not permit students to play it in your room.

2. Stop the class and talk briefly about the game. An integral part of the game is that the players must be convincing. Students can appear angry at one another as they shout slurs. Five minutes later they are friends

again. Most games can be diffused by simply announcing that the game is over. Be convincing and be consistent if this should happen again.

3. Tell the other students to begin their experiments. Mediate for the two players. "Just because he talked about your mother, it doesn't mean what he said is true. Now let's move on to the experiment at hand." This game might have started the day before or on the school bus and have been continued throughout the halls prior to this class meeting.

4. Diffuse the game and move the class to completing the experiment. Set aside a specific time to talk by assembling the class into cooperative groups. Have them brainstorm first about all the positive aspects and then about the negative aspects of the game. Be certain students learn about the history and the purpose of the game. It is designed to let off steam and relieve tension. It is a manhood rite developed to teach the players how to be strong in the face of danger or fearful situations and think on their feet. Mention Kunjufu's competencies and turn those competencies into advantages by having students match wits about some character in a history lesson or a scientific concept. They would be permitted to speak from notes they have taken about the character. Classmates could award points for accuracy and delivery.

5. Set up debates on the content of topics discussed in your class. Debate on current topics such as abortion, teen pregnancies, drugs, AIDS, and etc. Be certain to channel your best dozens players into leading roles in this debate.

6. It would be unwise to place a lot of focus on the fact that the boys may come to blows. This detracts from instructional time. Hill (1989) recommends that teachers locate a mentor - another teacher in the same school who is adept at handling boys' use of verbal strategies. Talk with your mentor about how to handle these efforts at self-identity. The face to face confrontation is an effort to avoid a fight.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is a teaching strategy that can take advantage of call-response and the development of communication competence.. (See Pine and Hilliard, 1990 and Slavin, 1987.) This small group process integrates immediate feedback, problem-solving, orality and literacy and has been used successfully with students of all ages. Cooperative learning involves dividing a given class into heterogeneous groups of three or four and assigning each group a certain amount of time to solve a problem or answer a research question. Group participants offer solutions which are recorded and then reported to the class.

The teacher integrates the group solutions by writing responses on a chart or the chalkboard and allowing the entire class time to reflect on a multiplicity of solutions and set priorities.

Research has documented numerous advantages to this teaching strategy: improved problem solving skills, increased motivation, improvement in achievement, attendance, involvement and the building of oral and written communicative competence. These skills are developed through intense interaction required within the groups. Each group member has a specified role: to lead discussion, to record notes, or to keep participants on task. All must listen and react to one anothers' suggestions. For every group activity the individual roles change, so that all members must participate and take their turn assuming each role. Students have an opportunity to interact with their peers, to express their ideas, transcribe them into print, compare them to those offered by their peers and select appropriate courses of action. With cooperative learning, orality can feed into literacy in creative and constructive ways. (See Health's, 1983, description of a literacy event, p. 386; Slavin, 1987, and Johnson and Johnson, 1988 for additional suggestions on cooperative learning.)

Conclusion

In most educational settings it is Black males who are most frequently placed in the corner in classrooms, sent to the principal's office, suspended and expelled. Black males

comprise the majority in classes for the mentally retarded and behavior disordered. Students recognize that this happens, so they devise strategies for survival - verbal strategies that they can use to maintain some measure of control over the school situation where all the cards seem to be stacked against them. They develop their verbal techniques using those same skills that help them survive in their communities or on the streets.

It is most unfortunate that, for the most part, those African American males who are most adept at rappin', woofin' and playin' the dozens are least successful in the school setting. Kunjufu (1988) contends that African-American males face a serious dilemma in the schools: To be popular or to be smart. If they choose to be popular among their peers, they are ostracized by the macroculture of the school. Being popular entails practicing and perfecting stylized verbal strategies, wearing name brand clothes, walking a special walk, wearing a special haircut, and exhibiting poor academic achievement. If they choose to be smart, they are more likely to succeed in school. They may be applauded by their teachers and listed on the honor roll. They may become bidialectal, using standard English in the classroom and Black dialect features when in the company of the peer group. The choice of being smart means ostracism by the African-American peer group and being labeled a nerd, a brainiac or a sissy.

It is the responsibility of teachers to learn to communicate with all of the children in their classes. Teachers who are

sensitized to the existence, origin and intent of verbal strategies can watch and listen for them in their classrooms and search for more effective ways to communicate with those who use them. Discipline problems may stem from communicative issues and cross cultural conflicts. African-American males who appear to challenge the teacher's authority may be selling woof tickets. Those who are not listening quietly when the teacher is presenting a lesson may be giving the teacher feedback on the information presented. Those who "interrupt" another student may be responding to a call that has been issued. Those who are socializing and responding in a loud voice may be searching for their identity, asserting their masculinity and confirming friendships. Those who seem to be using physical means to settle a conflict may be making their best effort to avoid a fight. Students who are successful at these verbal games must have the same intellectual ability that is needed to become school leaders: quick wit, good memory and ability to capture the attention of an audience with "linguistic ingenuity and verbal fluency".

The way teachers handle incidents such as these will be determined by the rapport they have established with their classes and whether or not they have made a serious effort to understand this natural process of moving from boyhood to manhood. Teachers are urged to listen to their students as they confirm their attempts at self-identity and be consistent in their treatment of them. It is the teacher's responsibility to

control the teaching-learning situation. Teachers must make a concerted effort to learn more about the cultural differences and similarities between themselves and their students. Differential levels of academic performance across cultures must be viewed as unacceptable.

SUMMARY

Communication between individuals from different cultures can fail simply because of the culturally-oriented assumptions the speakers make about one another's responses. The higher rate of discipline referrals among African-American males involves behaviors that are related to cultural and communicative issues. In an effort to build their communicative competence these adolescents adopt a highly stylized use of words and gestures, many of which can be misinterpreted by those who are unfamiliar with their culture.

Current demographics indicate that only one out of ten teachers will be African-American; the other nine will be White, probably females whose undergraduate education has presented them with little or no knowledge of the cultural orientation of African-American males. The chapter tries to sensitize teachers to three commonly used verbal strategies, their origin, purpose and use in the classroom and provide alternatives for teachers so they can maximize the communicative competence of those African-American males who use them.

DISCUSSION/PROJECTS

1. What reasons might you use to appeal to adolescents who use the verbal strategies to become bidialectal?

2. Should teachers approach the teaching of language arts to culturally different learners any differently than to other children? Give reasons for your answers.

3. Should teachers use these same verbal strategies as the students do? Why or why not?

4. View the video-tape American Tongues and answer the following questions.

How many different dialects exist in the United States? Cite examples of call-response. Do any of the African Americans in the tape use call- response? Look for verbal strategies being used by other cultures. Are there any examples of the dilemma between talking a special way and being ridiculed by peers? Cite specific instances.

5. It is important that teachers begin to watch and listen to how people use language. Conduct a survey of television programs that have adolescent African-American males. Make a note of the verbal strategies they use.

TV Program	Character	Strategy	Example
Fresh Prince of Bel Air			
What's Happening			
Different World			

6. Interview a group of African American males and have them give you the local names for the three strategies described in the article. Have them demonstrate each one.

   Interview a group of African American males who use the strategies. Find out how they feel about using standard English. Ask them these questions: What is standard English? When would you use it? How might you use standard English to help you? Give the names of people you know who use both standard English and Black Communications.

7. Direct a group of students in producing and performing in a rap video that summarizes a book or describes a concept they have learned. Use cooperative learning groups that work on writing the script, designing the costumes, selecting the scenery and the music and directing the performance. Have the best rappers take a leadership role in each group.

FURTHER READING

A number of good texts on this subject are available. For an excellent introduction to dialect variety see Alvarez and Koller (videotape). Portland Oregon Public Schools has produced African-American Baseline Essays for teachers to provide awareness of the history, culture and contributions of people of African descent along with lesson plans (by subject and grade level) for implementation of the content. Taylor (1987) succinctly introduces the cultural aspect and assists teachers with ways to recognize and utilize diversity. Hale-Benson (1982) presents early childhood applications for learning style. See Smitherman (1977) and Burling (1973) for thorough discussions of Black English with suggestions for teachers. Foster (1986) speaks from a European-American perspective, gives clear documentation and provides actual situations during which verbal strategies are used in the classroom. Bickerton (1985) and Alleyne (1980) discuss pidgins and creoles in more technical pieces. Kunjufu (1987-88) is appropriate reading for African-American males ages 8-13 to inspire and inform. Pine & Hilliard (1990) provide suggestions for curricular interventions. Abrahams (1963-76) provides comprehensive coverage of numerous verbal strategies. Hill (1989) offers practical suggestions very easily implemented directed to teachers of minority students.

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